

Employer Scheduling, Staffing and Work Location Issues

Introduction

In a much-abridged fashion, the 300-year history of the American workplace can be summed up as follows:

- When we were primarily an agricultural economy, we had no choice but to bring all the workers to the workplace — that’s where the dirt was.
- When we became primarily an industrial economy, we had no choice but to bring all the workers to the workplace — that’s where the assembly lines and machines were.
- When we became primarily an information economy, we initially had no choice but to bring all the workers to the workplace — that’s where the desks, typewriters, file cabinets, and all the other work resources were. But towards the end of the 20th century, we realized that for the first time in the history of the workplace, we now *did* have a choice — and we could use technology to bring some of the work to some of the workers.

This was the first time in the history of work and workplaces that we could separate the work activity — in this case “office work” — from the work location — in this case “the office.” This has always struck me as a rather profound change, one that strikes at the heart of most of our assumptions and beliefs about how and where work is organized and done. It is, of course, the basis of telework¹ and the reason for the Xavier University Symposium.

This paper explores several questions dealing with the effects of telework on the nature and structure of work and on life in the typical organization. The paper will in large part be descriptive, based on the author’s professional experience over almost 20 years in implementing telecommuting/telework programs in organizations in the United States and elsewhere. It also identifies some of the challenges that telework has created for employers, and makes some observations about the future linkages between the growth of telework in its various forms and the nature of organizations and organizational life.

The Effect of Telework and New Technologies on the Nature and Structure of Work

This is a topic that could be — and has been — the subject of entire books. Not only is it a broad topic but it’s a challenging one because of the somewhat circular nature of the relationship among the concept of telework, its supporting technologies, and the nature and structure of work.

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Also, we should consider one of the long-standing myths about telework — that it was created by and driven by technology. Had we still been in the paper, pencil, and typewriter era, goes the underlying logic for that myth, the concept of telework would never have emerged. This is a myth because if we go back to the early writings about telework in the early and middle 1970s, it is clear that the concept was about the *decentralization* of the workplace. The decentralization was, to be sure, techno-enabled; but other factors (such as growing traffic congestion) were much more on the minds of the early thinkers in this field, such as Jack Nilles.

The following discussion first focuses on some of the direct influences telework has had, and then on some of the more indirect or complex ways in which telework has influenced work — and vice versa.

Direct Influence #1: The “Silverware Drawer” Phenomenon

Based on both observation and anecdotal evidence, much of what goes on in most offices is the result of work methods that evolved rather than were planned. That evolutionary process was often affected (or tainted) by the whims and wishes of individual managers whose imprint on work methods long outlives their own tenure in the job. The image of the modern office as the pinnacle of rationality, finely-tuned and efficient processes, and smooth workflow is much more a fantasy than reality.

What happens when we overlay this kind of organization with even a small dose of telework? First, the inefficiencies with which everyone lives and which most people tolerate if not ignore quickly become apparent and annoying. The fact, for example, that a particular form must be signed by three people and be accompanied by photocopies of four documents — which is “how we’ve always done it” — gets close scrutiny because that process might be difficult if not impossible to follow if the workforce is distributed. The luxury of frequent, close contact among co-workers hides a multitude of process-design sins that can no longer be tolerated when telework begins. While it is sometimes the case that a convoluted process simply can’t be followed with a distributed workforce, it is more often the case that it *can* be followed but its inefficiency now becomes more evident.

This is the “silverware drawer” problem. Several years ago our family took a twelve-day summer vacation — longer than normal, and long enough to feel like we needed just a bit more time to get used to being in our own home again. The first time I was in the kitchen and went to reach for a knife while making dinner, I realized that our silverware — in a drawer next to the refrigerator and across the kitchen from the main food preparation area — was inconveniently located. The silverware had been in that drawer for the nearly 20 years we’d been living in this house, but the poor placement just hadn’t registered. It wasn’t until we were away from the patterns of living that were second nature to us that we realized there was a problem.

The same thing is true with telework and teleworkers. By virtue of their absence from the office for as little as one or two days a week, teleworkers begin to look at the tried and true work practices through a different lens, and they become a cadre of unpaid process-redesign consultants. At least that’s what *can* happen if their managers are open to — and not threatened by — the teleworkers’ observations and sugges-

tions. This benefit of telework is rarely mentioned in the literature; we hear about the effect on recruitment and retention, on office space requirements, and on individual employee performance — but we generally don't see this process-improvement factor. It is one of the most profound effects of telework because it can have significant effects on the functioning of the organization.

Direct Influence #2: Management Training: Chocolate-Covered Broccoli

It has been observed on more than one occasion that the overall quality of managerial skills in U.S. workplaces is variable at best and quite weak at worst. There are lots of reasons for this, including uneven commitments to training, the effects of downsizing on spans of control, and the tendency to promote good technicians into managerial jobs for which they may lack interest and/or qualifications. One of the hallmarks of organizations that will thrive in the future is their willingness to acknowledge this skill deficit and devote resources to management training.

An interesting side benefit of telework program implementation is its hidden ability to boost managerial skill levels without making it appear as if the managers are being trained. While there often is, and should be, training provided for managers of teleworkers, it is specifically designated as remote-management training. In reality, it is thinly disguised “Management 101” training that these very same managers would never sit still for if it was labeled as such.

For example, we know that it is essential for managers to be clear about performance expectations for remote workers. With much less opportunity for frequent, informal hallway contacts in the office, during which project progress can be discussed and methods fine-tuned, the manager must be crystal-clear about expected deliverables before the teleworker begins the task.

This takes the guesswork out of the equation, helps the teleworker commit to the task, and reduces the likelihood of errors. If you think that last sentence sounds like the way work should be done even if everyone is in the office, you're right. That's why managers who manage remotely invariably report that the act of managing at a distance makes them better managers — not only of the teleworkers but also of their in-office staff. That's why the implementation of telework has the serendipitous benefit of improving managerial performance across the board.

Direct Influence #3: Blurred Boundaries and the Mythical Value of Accessibility²

Telework is but one factor behind the growth in the list of places where office work can be and is done. Not only are we taking work home during the day, but we're taking it home at night and on weekends, and taking it with us on vacation, to our children's soccer games, and just about anywhere else we can tote a cell phone or laptop. This is the ultimate good news - bad news situation: the good news is that the technology lets us work just about anytime, anywhere — and the bad news is that we do.

As a result, the rather clear boundaries that used to exist between work and the rest of our lives have become blurred and in some cases have disappeared entirely. This isn't always bad, and it isn't always

undesirable in the employee's eyes. The problem develops when a worker wants to be disconnected from work (and not only from the workplace) yet is expected — or feels normative pressure — to be available and accessible. This phenomenon is not specific to teleworkers by any means.

The mobility and office-less office work that was initially made practical and visible through telework programs has become the springboard for a much broader kind of mobile work. The employee who works at home two days a week during normal working hours, for example, becomes an inadvertent stimulus for managerial expectations that other employees be similarly available and accessible even if they aren't formal teleworkers.

In many cases, we can attribute this to managerial malpractice or greed; managers tend to tether many of their workers to the office with the same technologies that might have initially been developed for use only by the teleworkers. They do so because they feel titled to in today's "do more with less" environment, or because they unquestioningly succumb to the "faster is better" assumption. The employees, on the other hand, often feel uncomfortable challenging these intrusions, for fear of being labeled "not a team player" or otherwise putting paycheck and career at risk.

It should be emphasized that telework is by no means responsible for most of our work anytime-anywhere trend today. It is simply one factor, perhaps best described as a catalyst, that has legitimized (at least in the minds of many managers) the expectation that just because an employee *can* check voice mail or e-mail at home at night or on weekends, or while on vacation, he/she *should*.

Direct Influence #4: Being at the Mercy of the Carriers

Shortly after the breakup of AT&T took effect in 1984, a marketing manager at one of the newly-formed Baby Bells was discussing the prospects for telecommuting (as it was commonly known then). He said, "the Baby Bells hold the future of telecommuting in the palms of their hands." He noted that one of the often-stated predictions about the effects of the breakup would be the lowering of long-distance rates, but that rates for local service would likely remain the same if not increase. Since most telecommunications connectivity for telecommuting back then, and to a large degree even today, is more local than long-distance in nature, the rate structure for local service would be either an enabling or impeding factor.

This marketing manager had little idea how right he was, but for entirely different reasons than were discussed at the time. As telework developed through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the local telephone operating companies quite steadily promoted telecommuting and telework to their business customers. It was, as one telco marketing manager said to me, the "new telemarketing" — meaning that just as the telecommunications industry had promoted telemarketing as a beneficial business practice, it would now start promoting telework as heavily. Both were revenue drivers for the carriers; more telemarketing (and telework) meant more phone lines, and more phone lines meant more revenue.

So far, so good: there's nothing wrong with a provider promoting a use of its products or services that benefits both its customers and itself. The problem developed when the carriers began promoting higher-

speed connections that would enable more kinds of telework, but were not able to reliably manage the process of taking orders for and installing those lines and making sure they worked. This problem began with ISDN more than a dozen years ago and is now making a second appearance with DSL.

Stones should not be cast at the carriers, nor should the complexity of turning a voice-centric national telecommunications infrastructure into a data-centric one be under-estimated. The problem from the employers' point of view is that the faster they wanted to pilot or implement telework, the faster they encountered the brick wall of telecommunications. The very same carriers that had been actively promoting telework and providing free seminars and implementation advice now became the adversary and the bottleneck.

Perhaps this is a case where the carriers created their own monster. Perhaps they underestimated the growth in demand, or overestimated the actual ease of rolling out hundreds of thousands of broadband lines to households. No matter what the cause, the result is that today virtually every employer who wants to implement or expand telework must cobble together a telecommunications strategy that somehow blends ISDN, DSL, cable modems, and perhaps satellite as the pipes through which work will flow from office to home and back again. The employers spend untold hours trying to deal with a growing number of providers and a growing list of explanations and excuses for why those 50 teleworkers within a 20-mile radius of the office can't get high-speed access as is advertised endlessly.

Telework's Impact on Communications Patterns

It is only by getting involved in telework that many organizations realize just how convoluted their communications patterns have become. The initial response is to figure out how to maintain or replicate those patterns in the newly-dispersed organization, but in many ways that is like the proverbial exercise of paving the cow paths: you end up with smoother roads but they are still full of the twists and turns that make using them almost impossible.

Here is just one example: consider the typical situation where an IT support group is responsible for providing help to and answering questions from a line department. Those requests typically come by phone or in person, and most often accompanied by a tone of desperation as the user realizes, for instance, that he/she may have just accidentally deleted a huge report that was in the works for weeks. If the IT professional is in the office, the frantic user can be calmed down and the search for the missing file can begin. Note that in this example, the need for support is not simply a "how do I . . ." request; there is a sense of urgency and perhaps panic with which the IT person must contend.

This is precisely the kind of scenario that causes managers to be skeptical about telework. "How can we possibly provide that kind of support if my people are sitting in their spare bedrooms 30 miles from here?" is the typical response. The following are possible answers:

- Perhaps the distant teleworker really can't provide that support, and thus the work shifts to a fellow worker who remains in the office;

- Perhaps the distant teleworker will be equipped with a pager, and the users are guaranteed response to pager calls within ten minutes;
- Perhaps the distant teleworker and the user jointly review the problem using one of today's collaboration software tools that enables two people to look at the same screen, and to have one person control the keyboard and mouse functions of the other. This happens while both are on the phone for audio contact. In this way, the teleworker does the electronic equivalent of sitting down next to the user and walks him/her through the solution.

Let's examine the extent to which all three seem to create a new communication pattern — but really don't:

- In the first case, the user now must deal with someone with whom there might not be a basis of trust and familiarity. New pattern? Not really; the same thing can and does happen if the preferred IT support person is out sick, at a meeting, on vacation, or at lunch and someone else steps in to handle the problem.
- In the second case, the same person provides the support but it now happens over the phone. New pattern? Not really; much of the support provided in-office happens over the phone, so it's the same familiar voice at the other end. The only possible difference is that instead of simply dialing an extension and getting the IT person, that phone call triggers an out-call to the pager and a return call back to the user.
- In the third case, the same person provides the support but it is now electronically mediated. New pattern? Perhaps; the use of these collaboration tools has been rare within the office but that's changing quickly. Soon, it will be as likely that support will happen this way as by sitting down next to each other.

None of these three variations necessarily has the same feel and effect as if the IT person and the user were in the same place at the same time — but these alternatives are not as different as many people think. If the end result is the same — the user gets prompt and helpful support — then the slight change in methods makes little difference.

But the implications of the example do not end here. Let's invoke the "silverware drawer" phenomenon and imagine that this frantic call for support causes the teleworker and/or his/her manager to reflect on the nature of the call itself — and perhaps of many other similar calls. Rather than focus solely on figuring out how to continue to provide user support, their analysis might point to the need for training, or for software upgrades.

Help-desk support requests can be a goldmine of information when the requests are understood for what they often are — symptoms of underlying problems. If only one or two scattered users call for help with missing files, then perhaps there's no underlying problem. But if five or ten calls a week come in on this subject, maybe that's a sign that some refresher training is needed or that a newer version of software (less prone to accidental file deletions) should be installed.

That somewhat lengthy example portrayed a positive and perhaps unexpected effect of telework on communications. There is no doubt, though, that there are numerous negative effects as well. Voice mail, email and all other technology notwithstanding, there's no replacement yet for the casual hallway encounter, the friendly smile and greeting in the cafeteria, or the spontaneous brainstorming that happens when people involved in a problem get together. Some of today's technology and some on the drawing board will at best approximate those exchanges but never will, and never should, replace them.

It is the richness of these kinds of contacts that is at risk with telework — but it is a manageable risk. One of the most important determinants of how many days a teleworker can spend away from the office is the importance he/she attaches to these social contacts — and their business value. The more days that more teleworkers are out of the office, the more fragile the social network and information exchange in the office can become.

The reason this risk is manageable is because we have ample experience with preventing problems from occurring. The controlling factors, in addition to number of days of telework per week, include:

- Careful selection of jobs for telework, and of teleworkers;
- Careful choice of various communications tools to put in the teleworker's "toolkit," and training for teleworkers and their peers about how and when to use these tools;
- Deliberate planning for more casual, relaxed opportunities for in-person interaction when teleworkers are in the office;
- Adequate training for teleworkers about the best ways to stay in touch with the office while away from it.

It would be wrong to say that communications in the office are not affected by telework, but it would also be wrong to assume that the effects are all negative.

Telework's Impact on Decision-Making

Telework's impact on decision-making is almost entirely positive, for one simple reason: to the extent that telework forces faster, lower-level decision making that involves fewer people, the organization can only benefit. It is the rare organization in which people don't complain about "how long it takes to get a decision made around here," or about "how many people have to sign off on a decision." Perhaps one reason so many people must get involved is simply that their proximity allows them to — when the links in the chain of command are close together, it doesn't take as much effort to pass everything further up that chain.

Telework has a strong thread of empowerment; well-selected teleworkers with sound experience and skills are more capable than the workforce at large to make more of their own decisions, instead of dragging everything (and everyone) into a conference room for a meeting. Taken to an extreme, this can create

problems; there's a difference between being empowered and being a renegade. But there is little risk of these excesses, because the same characteristics that allow someone to be chosen as a teleworker should keep that person from acting immaturely or impulsively.

The Challenges Telework Creates for Employers

Three major, and one lesser challenge constitute dominant issues raised by telework.

Sedition Against Tradition

The key challenge telework creates today is the same one it created 20 years ago: telework is different, and most organizations (and most adults) thrive on constancy. We've been going to the office for more than a century, and to centralized work locations for more than three centuries. No matter how beneficial telework is, it still upsets the organizational apple cart.

Ironically, the very same organizations that bemoan the challenges of dispersing the workforce are often the ones that have field organizations (sales reps, service staff, auditors, consultants, etc.) numbering in the hundreds or thousands. It isn't the working away from the office is new — it's that having traditional office workers work away from the office is new, or newer.

Telework forces an organization out of its comfort zone, and as such, is business process reengineering in disguise. Let's say, for example, that ten-person Department X has been having a staff meeting every Friday morning from 10 a.m. to noon for as long as anyone can remember. Four people in the department who normally attend that meeting now start to telework, and there's a great deal of gnashing of teeth about whether they should be required to be in the office on Friday to attend, or if they can attend by conference call, or if they can arrange their schedules so that at least two of the four attend each week's meeting.

Solutions can be found, and are, but this is another case where the "silverware drawer" phenomenon shows up. One of those telecommuters will undoubtedly say (after a few weeks of attending by conference call, for example), "Why *do* we have this staff meeting every week? Is it really necessary? If so, can we at least vary the agenda, or make it every other week, or . . .?"

What if There's No "There" There?

The second major challenge is to the assumptions about building and maintaining an organization focused on place-based work. This will be discussed further in the following section. It should be noted now, however, that everything from accounting and payroll systems to the delivery of paper clips has, for the most part, assumed that the workers are coming to the workplace and will stay there. This is an intriguing can of worms that telework has opened, and it is just starting to be understood.

Managers, Take Cover

Many factors are chipping away at the church- and military-based hierarchical organizational model that is the basis of today's corporation. Telework probably isn't at the top of the list but it's not far away. Bureaucracies do an excellent job convincing managers that their worth and self-image is determined in large part by the scope of their command; start nibbling away at a manager's empire and that person begins to get nervous.

If self-management and empowerment are central to telework, what does that say about the role of, and need for, the typical middle manager? It is unlikely that they will disappear, but their role will change dramatically, and this process has already begun. A colleague notes that the manager's job today is changing from being a "sage on the stage" to being a "guide on the side." This change is triggered not only by (and not even mainly by) telework, but telework is a catalyst that will hasten this transition.

A Taxing Problem

There is a fourth challenge to consider that has received relatively little attention, but it is growing in importance and deserves to be on the radar screens of both employers and government. It is the issue of "situs," or the determination of the focal point of a business's operations when there is a difference between the physical centralization of the business offices and the actual location of the workers.

In the old days, when a company's office was located in, say, New York City, it was fairly easy to determine who owed taxes to whom. Even with the complicated nature of New York City taxes, and those of adjoining states, and the commuting patterns from the three surrounding states, the rules were relatively clear. Both the employees and employer knew to whom taxes were owed and which payments to one jurisdiction would be credited against taxes due to another one.

Today things are different. Teleworkers who are employed by that same New York City employer may spend only one to three days a week working in Manhattan, and the rest of the time work at home in New Jersey, New York or Connecticut — or perhaps further away. The tax implications of this are not the same as for a sales representative employed by the same company but located in a territory in New Jersey; in that case, the sales rep probably does not have an office in Manhattan and spends virtually all of his/her working time in New Jersey — so the tax issues are clearer.

The situs problem affects individual income taxes when assessed at the city or state level, as well as various payroll and other franchise taxes assessed on the employer. In these cross-jurisdictional issues, it seems that whenever an employer or employee asks the relevant tax agencies for clarification, they *all* say that tax is due to them. There's no shortage of hands reaching into the pockets of teleworkers and their employers.

This situs issue is very similar to the state sales tax problem that first surfaced when we began doing extensive catalog ordering and shipments were made from vendors in one state to customers in others. We've seen an updated twist on this in the age of the Internet, with more confusion about taxation on

“virtual stores” and so on. Although this is a tangled situation, and goes far beyond telework, it is important to note that employers perceive this confusion as an increasingly significant stumbling block for telework. This author is unaware of any employers who have avoided telework programs or ended them because of this tax confusion, but many have seen it as just one more troublesome burden that they’d rather avoid. Nobody is trying to escape legitimate tax liability; they’re simply struggling to find out what that liability is.

The Intriguing Interplay among Space, Staff, Work and Tools

There was a time when it was possible and even sensible to talk about space, staffing, work design and technology as relatively discrete topics. Those days are gone forever.

If we think the chicken-and-egg dilemma is vexing, it’s nothing compared to trying to sort out the causal relationship among an organization’s planning about the work it does, the staff and tools it uses to do that work, and the spaces within which the work is done. The simple causality that used to exist (*what* we need to do leads to *who* we need to do it and what they need and *where* they need to be) is long gone. Today, it is just as likely that the choice of tasks is driven by the range of tools available and the nature and number of employees that can be recruited and retained.

Telework really upsets the organizational apple cart, but in a good way. Telework does for most organizations what the automatic teller machine (ATM) did for banking: it disengages task from place, and people from task. Not that many years ago, if you wanted to withdraw money from your account you had to physically appear at your bank during the hours it defined as “open,” and you conveyed your wishes to a teller who performed the desired transaction through the use of tools on his/her side of the thick glass shield. Today, you can walk up to a square piece of steel embedded in the side of a building anywhere around the world, at any time, and interact with the tools yourself and get your money. The ATM freed the banks from the boundaries of time and space. Telework can do the same for almost all organizations.

Once we no longer require that everyone has to be at the same place at the same time to work, organizations now have before them a wealth of opportunities for new product and service offerings. Office space becomes a variable, rather than fixed, overhead item. Technology is deployed, not centralized. And in some cases, employees (or contractors) actually own the tools they use to create “deliverables.”

The banking example is not a flawless metaphor, however. Many would say that the ATM made the term “personal service” into an oxymoron in banking, and that banks continued to push more costs onto the customer at the same time as the costs of doing business kept dropping. Similarly, telework is at an interesting turning point: we can blend our decisions about space, staff, work and tools in a way that creates a “win-win” solution, or we can do it in a way that spreads more pain than gains.

There is reason to be optimistic that corporate America will draw back from the temptation of using telework to disenfranchise employees en route to paring costs to the bare bone. Some may feel this is

misplaced optimism, and that telework is just as likely to create a nation of “electronic sweatshops” as it is a nation of households in which work and life are better balanced, corporate costs are controlled, and technology is used to facilitate work and not to scrutinize and penalize workers.

Conclusions

In this author’s library are two books about the history of the telephone and the process by which it became part of our society. It is clear from these books that when the first phones came into use, nobody was thinking about how easy it would be to order a pizza to be delivered, send a baby’s photo to a distant grandparent, or watch a toddler playing in a day care center. Instead, there were rather emotional debates about what one should say when picking up a ringing phone, and about the grievous social consequences of calling someone instead of writing a letter or sending a messenger.

We’re not quite at the same threshold today with telework, but we’re not far beyond it. Within a few years, the questions we are asking today about telework and the doubts and fears we’re discussing will likely seem as outdated and confounding as does the supposedly crass *faux pas* of actually calling someone to accept an invitation instead of sending a handwritten response on engraved stationery. Though not without its faults and problems, we (as individuals, as employers, and as government bodies) will master these telework challenges and will soon stop talking about *where* work is done and instead just be concerned about *what* work is done.

We are on the verge of saying goodbye to place-defined work. As Woody Leonhard wrote in his book *The Underground Guide to Telecommuting*, “work is something you do, not someplace you go.”

End Notes

¹ There have been long academic papers and heated debates devoted to the lexicon of mobile work. The more popular and common term in the United States has been “telecommuting” while “telework” has been used more often in most of Europe and Asia. Grammatically speaking, “telework” is, of course, the better term because it translates as “distance work” while “telecommuting” translates, somewhat nonsensically, as “distance commuting.” Correct grammar notwithstanding, this author often lapses into using the term “telecommuting” out of habit, and because it remains the more commonly used term in the United States. But, as noted on the author’s Web site, “I don’t care what you call it as long as you do it.”

² The author acknowledges that the views expressed on this topic are influenced by recently having finished a new book titled, *TURN IT OFF: How to Unplug from the Anytime-Anywhere Office Without Disconnecting Your Career*. Apart from any self-interest, this is a significant issue.

Introduction

This paper addresses four issues raised by Gordon concerning telework. First, where he draws primarily on experience, it is preferable to use systematic data, which is particularly difficult to obtain given the lack of agreement on the very definition of the term “telework.” Second, where he (as well as the session organizers) emphasizes the force of technology, the force of human action must also be emphasized. This perspective suggests telework may not be so much a chapter in the history of technology as a chapter in the history of management ideologies and management strategies for the cost-effective use and control of labor. Third, where Gordon sees opportunity, there is also constraint. Finally, where he paints a broad view, specificity, variation, and differences must be emphasized. Teleworkers are not simply upper echelon managerial and professional employees, they are distributed across the occupational spectrum, in a range of industries and income levels. Policies must address such variation rather than assume unity.

The Need for Systematic Data

From this author’s perspective as a social scientist, four points of Gordon’s paper require modification. The most basic question that Gordon addresses, but only as an aside is, Who are teleworkers? The second question he asks is, How many are there? We cannot answer the second question without answering the first. As many participants at this telework conference have suggested, definitions (and therefore counts and analyses) of teleworkers clearly vary widely. In the absence of a clear definition, it would seem that telework has gotten a lot of press lately

A search of all major newspaper articles on telework over the last two decades, shows the term appeared for the first time, in the *Christian Science Monitor*, in the early 1980s.¹ There followed a long period of quiescence — nobody was talking much about teleworkers or at least not using the term. Then in the 1990s — especially the last few years — the discussions mounted. In the first part of this decade, only 37 articles appeared. By the second half, there were more than three times that many. Telework has recently become a hot topic. But what is the “it” that is telework? The articles tend to focus on professionals and managers — those of us who can capture the attention of not only consultants and politicians but also journalists. But that misses many, if not most, of the people who work at home. When the terms “homework” and “contingent workers” are added to the search, articles about the people who work at home abound.

The Force of Technology vs. the Force of Human Action

There is a long-standing argument about the extent to which technology drives people and the extent to which people drive technology. Historians and economists are still debating whether the “industrial revolution” was a result of technology or other social forces. By using the new term “telework” (rather than the available older terms, like “homework” or “contingent labor” of which telework is a part), we prioritize technology. Although Gordon clearly recognizes that technology does not operate alone, he seems to view it as an important motor of change. By posing the question, “How have telework and new technologies changed the nature and structure of work?” the conference organizers have even more clearly emphasized the role of technology. Conversely, it should be stressed that when we seek causes, we also emphasize the restructuring of the economy, labor pools, and the more general move to contingent labor. These changes are not so much the straightforward result of technology but rather of cost cutting and the availability of an economic infrastructure that makes it possible for companies to coordinate contingent workers and workers away from brick and mortar factories and buildings more generally. Telework may not be so much a chapter in the history of technology as a chapter in the history of management ideologies and management strategies for the cost-effective use and control of labor. In this context, companies appear to save money with parttime or contract workers without pensions and vacations, fewer office expenses and sometimes even their own equipment. This raises two questions:

- Do workers want telework? Or, better yet, under what conditions do we — employers and employees — want telework? When telework was first introduced, most of the employees worked away from the centralized work site voluntarily. But we are now entering an era of much more involuntary telecommuting, in which employees are not given a choice about where to work (Barker and Christensen 1998). Why does this matter? Because, if we get away from technological determinism — acknowledging that humans design technology rather than the other way around — then we recognize that the technology of telework does not determine its social organization. Thus, we can make and redirect changes so as to make choices about our lives.
- Who pays the hidden costs? Using ATMs as an analogy, Gordon suggests that while they pushed more costs onto the consumers, American corporations just won’t do the same thing when it comes to telework. Why not?

From this viewpoint, other questions are raised about the consequences of telework for employees. For example, their safety. This was, of course, the underlying debate this year about an OSHA letter providing guidance to one employer on his employees working at home. Advocates said it would do damage to businesses. As Chris Wysocki, president of the Small Business Survival Committee, said “It will effectively ban all telecommuting and working at home because employers can’t afford the risk if something goes wrong in a person’s home.” In the face of such criticism and widespread confusion regarding OSHA’s intentions, OSHA withdrew the letter. OSHA’s Assistant Secretary, Charles Jeffress, stated that “OSHA will not hold employers liable for work activities in employees’ home offices; . . . (and) OSHA does not, and will not, inspect home offices.” (January 25, 2000 Testimony before the Subcommittee on Employment, Safety, and Training of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions). While this may be cost efficient for employers, it is a way of transferring social and economic costs to workers. Most

Americans now agree that employers have the obligation to ensure (and pay for) safety at the workplace (and it was intense struggles which got those safety guidelines), but we are now taking a very different position when that work moves away from the workplace.

On the day OSHA rescinded the letter, U.S. Labor Secretary Alexis M. Herman said, “We need a national dialogue to determine what the rules and policies should be for America’s workers.” So here we are. We can’t let this dialogue be too one-sided. We should emphasize *both* costs to and responses of employers. But we also should emphasize abuses and responses of workers.

These points along with Gordon’s comments on issues in taxation suggest that this is just part of a much larger problem. Labor law – the framework of which was built in the 1930s and 1940s – has become increasingly out of date in its ability to serve teleworkers or contingent workers more generally (du Rivage, Carre and Tilly 1998).

The Element of Constraint

Where Gordon sees opportunity, there is also constraint. If we are to believe a long tradition of research that emphasizes the importance of face-to-face interaction, we know that while there are surely gains to employers and employees of working at home, there are also likely costs. We know for example the importance of face-to-face contact for business communication and decision making. We know much communication and decision making goes on around coffeepots and in bathrooms. It is also in these informal settings where much information is gained and much control — by co-workers and bosses — is exerted. This may produce unrecognized costs to employees and employers. As many have already noted, commitment, loyalty and maybe productivity come out of that interaction (e.g., see Kaye 1992). Thus, the cost efficiency of telework is less straightforward than it might seem at first glance. However, in their review of relevant research on “computer supported social networks” (a mouthful with its own acronym, CSSN), sociologist Wellman and colleagues (1996) seem to agree with Gordon (and his charming discussion of the “silverware drawer problem”) that telework often allows more uninhibited and creative interactions than do many face-to-face exchanges. This can be both good and bad. Relaxed exchanges may recreate segregated social networks. But the real trick is specifying what kinds of tasks and communication require face-to-face interaction and what kinds do not. There is a grand tradition in sociological research on primary groups and formal organizations that raises precisely that question (see, for example, Litwak 1966; 1985). From the perspective of management, it is possible that several types of tasks do not require, or depend relatively little, on face-to-face interaction, including:

- highly routine tasks, especially those where there is a measurable output such that controls are exerted in the absence of observation of a process;
- the small number of tasks where detailed observation is possible at a distance (like some kinds of data entry);
- situations where the infrastructure already exists for work to go on at a distance (like sales); or

- where work is sufficiently creative (like writing) that observation does not provide a good set of controls.

The challenge for management and employers is to make these distinctions (rather than to develop general policies). These two situations also suggest a bifurcation of the kind (or status and class) of workers who can do telework.

The Need for Specificity and Variation

Gordon paints a broad view. From this author's viewpoint, specificity is needed and variation must be emphasized. Some teleworkers, like those the media along with Gil Gordon seem to focus on, are workers in the upper echelons who are relatively high paid and have control over their work environment. He talks about how all of "us" are now working longer hours, taking work home or to our children's soccer games. This is not "all of us." It is professional and managerial types — the better paid, more autonomous ranks of the labor force — who are the ones expanding hours away from the workplace (Jacobs and Gerson 1999). Gordon's point about how work at home might even increase employers' expectations for work any place, any time (teleworkers become sort of like mothers) is a good one. But teleworkers aren't just in the upper echelons. As Dannhauser (1999) writes: "There are few universals within this group. They're builders and salesmen, plumbers, and writers, marketers and Mary Kay reps. It makes for a demographic debacle." (See also Van Horn and Storen 2000, in which, even using a relatively narrow definition of telework, they find teleworkers distributed across a wide occupational spectrum). The term telework doesn't only cover a wide range of workers, it also collapses industries and occupations (Gerson, forthcoming). We are talking about far more employees than those in the upper reaches of management, about workers who have far less chance to be creative. Most people who do telework are contingent: part time, temporary, contract labor. Discussions of *general* consequences of telework — whether for communication or decision making, productivity or creativity — may obfuscate as much as they reveal.

The consequences of telework are very different depending on which employers, which workers, and which industries we examine. Comparisons of clerical and managerial teleworkers make this clear. Research suggests, for example, that among pink-collar workers, telework leads to social isolation and seems to curtail informal conversation. In contrast, among professionals, telework may increase informal contact and autonomy (Soares 1992; Wellman et al. 1994; 1996; Durrenberger, et al. 1996).² This conflation of different types of teleworkers reminds me of much earlier work on gender and work. There was a spate of studies, for example, on the effects of mothers' employment on children, on the effects of women's employment on children, on the effects of women's employment on divorce, on the effect of wives' employment on marital satisfaction, and on the effects of women's entry into the labor force on organizational initiatives. The simplistic dichotomy of working and non-working women proved conceptually insufficient and, not surprisingly, often yielded findings that were neither generalizable nor reliable. Clearly, we are now approaching the same point in studies of telework. We need to talk about variation rather than issue broad statements about the impact of telework.

As these comparisons should imply, a particularly important variation is not only the occupation, industry and class but also the gender of the workforce. Understanding the gender of teleworkers helps us think about and perhaps address the challenges telework creates for both employees and employers. Both men and women are working for pay at home but their experiences are often quite different. Not only are women more likely to be concentrated in the lower paying, more isolated telework, it is typically women who are still responsible for unpaid domestic work, including childcare and kin care (Deutsch 2000; Gerstel 2000). Telework reinforces that gendered division of labor. It is, however, difficult to take care of a child, call a sick mother, or make a meal while you are entering data or writing memos (Christensen 1989). In response, women teleworkers turn to paid childcare paying rates equivalent to those who work outside the home (Falconer 1993 cited in Wellman, et al. 1996). Since these women are working for pay at home, they typically do not receive employer provided workplace benefits, like vouchers, referrals for child care or paid parental leave.

This concentration of women raises a number of issues not only about paid work but about the relationship of paid and unpaid work — one of the central themes in the Department of Labor’s recent report “Futurework: Trends and Challenges for Work in the 21st Century” (2000). Panels about telework and organizational behavior such as the one we are in today should be careful not to imply that the only workplace is the one where we get paid. Some research has suggested that women tend to want to do telework for reasons very different from men: women need to do paid work at home so they can also do unpaid work for their families — a topic addressed by other authors in this volume. The relationship between paid and unpaid work brings to light one final point. Recent research by Arlie Hochschild (1997), in her much touted and debated *Time Bind*, reminds us that many employees today want to go to work *away* from home. That workplace away from home is becoming a surrogate home — the employees she studied are fleeing the pressures of home for pleasures of the job. Teleworkers lose some of those pleasures. Perhaps that is the greatest challenge of telework.

End Notes

¹ Result of Lexus Nexus search of major newspapers, 1980 – 2000, on October 2000.

² Even this distinction — between professional and non-professional workers — is insufficient. Many have also noted a growing polarization of the amount of control exerted within the ranks of computer professionals and engineers (Kunda 1992).

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